

Introduction

The prospect of examinations can be daunting. However, you can take charge of many aspects of the exam process so that, when you enter the exam room, you feel in the best possible position to perform well.



Knowing the purpose of exams, understanding some ways that exams can be an advantage to you, and having techniques and strategies that you can use, can all help to create the positive mindset needed for a successful exam experience.

I. The Purpose of Exams

The main purpose of exams is for lecturers to check that you understand the work covered on the course and to ensure that the work which demonstrates this is entirely your own. Preparing for exams involves a high release of energy and an unusual degree of focus. These produce a very intense kind of learning that is not easy to reproduce under any other conditions.

II. Some Advantages of Examinations

There are some positive benefits from exams!

- You cannot be expected to give very long or detailed answers in exams: you need to use less information than in a comparable piece of coursework. As a result, less in-depth research and reading may be needed than if you were set additional coursework.
- You don't have to write out references or bibliographies in full at the end.
- Examiners are generally more sympathetic about weak presentation, minor grammatical errors, spellings, and forgotten details than lecturers are for coursework.
- Compared with continual assessment, there is less pressure on you throughout the year.

III. What Does Revision Involve?

Revision is the process of reviewing the work to be examined, going over it to:

- check you have covered the syllabus in sufficient breadth and depth
- remind yourself of what you have learnt
- check your understanding
- employ strategies to help recall in the exam room.

The pressure of the exam stimulates you to draw together the strands of your study, and to acknowledge areas that need more work.

You can view this pressure either:

- negatively - as stress and the likelihood of failure
- or positively - as a challenge encouraging you to heighten your own expertise.

IV. Preparing for an Exam

Before an exam approaches, it is useful to make adequate preparations. These include the following:

1 Organise your notes

The process of sorting out what is 'essential' helps to remind you of material covered during the year.

- Reduce your notes - to key headings, points and citations (name and

date only).

- Make master cards - using memory triggers. You could also use pattern notes or concept pyramids.

- Check your learning. Work interactively with materials. Write out or record what you have to recall. Test your recall.

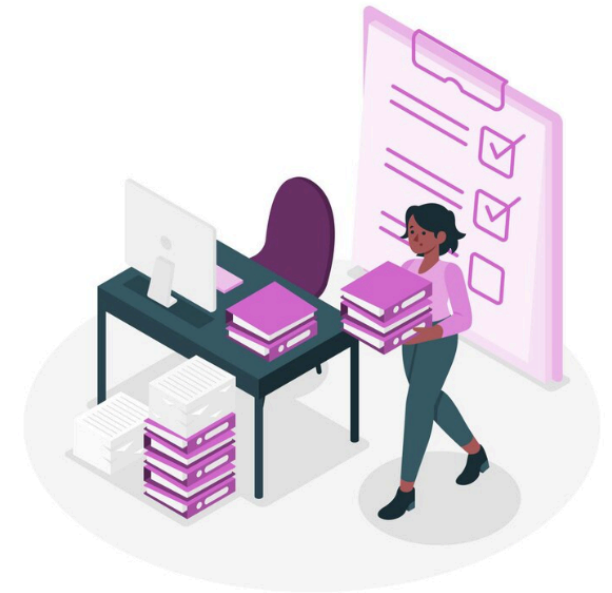
Write and test recall of

difficult material several times to build your memory.

2 Use past exam papers

Past exam papers are your best resource. The phrasing of these might feel off-putting: questions may seem vague as they cannot 'give away the answer'. It is good to become familiar with such wording before the exam.

- Remember that each question links to an area of the course. You need to find that link and consider which issues the question is directing you towards.



- Look for patterns of recurring questions.
- Check the minimum number of topics you could have revised to complete that paper.

3 Select what to revise

The revision process is especially one of selection.

- Select which topics you are going to revise. If you will need to answer three exam questions, revise at least five topics.
- Work out answers to a range of possible exam questions for each topic, so that you feel able to deal with almost any question that might be set on the topics you have chosen.
- Select the most important theories, references and evidence for each topic. It is much easier to do this before the exam than during it.
- Organise the selected information so that it is easier to remember.

4 Draw up a timetable

Work out exactly how much time you have to revise, given potential 'emergencies', and time to relax.

- If they carry equal marks, divide the time equally between the subjects you are studying, and then between the selected topics.
- Set aside time for practising past papers.
- Read about time management.

5 Build up writing speed

Quality and relevance are more important than quantity. Concise answers can get high marks. However, if you are used to word-processing most of your work, your handwriting speed may have diminished. Practising timed essays - or writing anything at speed every day - will help build the muscles needed for handwriting at speed.

6 New reading just before the exam

Opinion varies on whether you should read new material just before exams. It can keep your thinking fresh and bring your work into perspective. If reading new material confuses you, however, just focus on the notes you have already.

Revision Strategies

A good revision mentality requires creativity, interactive study techniques, a high degree of motivation, time management, working well with others, writing skills and being able to use your powers of selectivity, critical thinking and memory.

1 Exam Material

Have a revision mentality for the whole term or year.

- a) Make your notes clear, visual, colourful, dynamic, and memorable:

- ▶ This encourages active engagement with the material and aids in retention. Visual aids, colors, and dynamic formats can make information easier to understand and remember.
- b) Leave lots of space to add new information later:
 - ▶ Provides room for additional notes, updates, or clarifications as you continue to learn and review the material.
- c) Make flashcards of key information as you go along:
 - ▶ Helps condense important information into bite-sized, easily digestible chunks for quick review and memorization.
- d) Go over material at regular intervals so that you have less to do at the last minute:
 - ▶ Promotes spaced repetition, a highly effective study technique for long-term retention, by reviewing material consistently over time rather than cramming it all in at once.

2 Time Management

- a) Use time carefully:
 - ▶ Encourages efficient time management during study sessions to maximize productivity and focus.
- b) Start as early in the year as possible:

- ▶ Avoids last-minute rushes and reduces stress by allowing ample time for thorough understanding and retention of the material.
- b) Draw up a revision timetable:
 - ▶ Provides a structured plan for allocating time to review different topics or subjects, ensuring comprehensive coverage and balanced preparation.
- c) Draw up a Priority organiser:
 - ▶ Helps prioritize tasks and topics based on their importance or difficulty level, ensuring that you allocate more time and effort to areas that need it most.
- d) Make a Time circle for revision:
 - ▶ Offers a visual representation of how to distribute your revision time across different subjects or topics, helping to maintain a balanced study schedule.
- e) Use stray moments for revision:
 - ▶ Utilizes otherwise wasted time, such as waiting in



line or commuting, for quick review sessions, maximizing study efficiency.

3 Collaborative work

- a) Work with others:
 - ▶ Collaborating with peers allows for the exchange of ideas, perspectives, and explanations, which can deepen understanding and clarify concepts.
- b) Arrange revision sessions with friends:
 - ▶ Group study sessions provide opportunities for discussion, clarification of doubts, and sharing of study techniques, enhancing learning through peer interaction.
- c) Ask for help:
 - ▶ Don't hesitate to seek clarification or assistance from classmates, teachers, or tutors when encountering difficulties. Getting help early can prevent misunderstandings from snowballing into larger problems.
- d) Find out from tutors how exam answers differ from course essays:
 - ▶ Understanding the specific requirements and expectations for exam answers versus coursework essays can help tailor your revision and exam preparation strategies accordingly.

4 Memory wonder-work

- a) Use memory triggers
 - ▶ Devise memory triggers.
 - ▶ Distil your notes to key points, key words, and memory triggers.
 - ▶ Learn by heart essential information only, such as dates, names and concepts.
- b) Revise by ear:
 - ▶ Record yourself answering questions - listening to your own voice can help memory.

5 Self-management

- a) Keep a positive mindset:
 - ▶ Maintaining a positive attitude and belief in your ability to succeed can boost motivation, resilience, and overall performance during the study process.
 - ▶ Work on your motivation and your attitude towards



exams.

- ▶ Regard difficulties as challenges for which you can devise new strategies.

b) Stay healthy - Sleep, relax and take plenty of breaks.

V. During the Exam

- Orientate yourself.
- Find a positive, calm, focused state of mind.
- Check that you have been given the right exam paper.
- Read the instructions slowly, at least twice.
- Fill out personal details exactly as required.
- Read the whole paper. Always check both sides, even if you think one side is blank.
- Divide your time equally among questions that carry the same marks.
- Jot down the times you will begin each question.

1 Selecting exam questions

- Read each question through at least twice.
- Work out what is expected, in general, for each question. Which part of the course does it refer to? Towards which issues is the question directing you?
- If a question sounds like one you have done before, check the

wording very carefully before you select it. A slight difference in wording might require a very different answer.

- Tick all questions you could attempt. Tick twice the ones you could answer best.

- For the questions you select, highlight keywords in the title. Notice how many parts there are to the question. Read questions through phrase by phrase to make sure you have not misread or misinterpreted them. At this stage you may realise that a question is not what you thought, and may need to select a different one.

- At any time, jot down ideas you have about any of your selected questions on a separate sheet. Note the relevant question number beside each idea.



2 Writing exam essays

Follow a similar procedure to that used when writing any other essay. Use structure, organisation, evidence and a clear line of reasoning - without these, you will get very few marks for content.

Exam essays can be easier to write because:

- you need less evidence and fewer examples than for coursework
- you can write less about each point
- you can miss out some background detail
- you don't need to give a bibliography or supply detailed references
- minor grammatical and spelling errors, and rushed handwriting (provided it's readable), are generally less important.

3 'What if I go blank?'

- Don't try too hard to remember. Leave a space - it may come back later.
- You may be too tense - use a relaxation exercise you have used before.
- Use a 'getting started' trick
- Keep writing. On spare paper, jot down any words that have



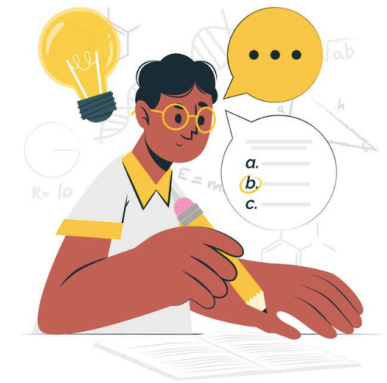
anything to do with the question. These should eventually start to prompt your memory into action.

- Ask yourself questions, starting with the most basic - who? when? what? how? - until you become more focused.

VI. Tips on How to Answer Common Types of Exam Questions

1 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)

- Read the question and all options carefully before selecting your answer. Eliminate obviously incorrect options first. Pay attention to qualifiers like "always," "never," "only," etc. Use the process of elimination if you're unsure. Sometimes, looking for patterns or keywords can help you identify the correct answer.



2 True/False Questions

- Carefully read the statement and analyze it for accuracy. Even if part of the statement is true, the entire statement must be true for it to be marked as such. Look for absolutes like "always" or "never" which often indicate a false statement. Sometimes, qualifiers like "usually," "often," or "rarely" can help you determine if a statement is true or false.

3 Short Answer Questions

- Answer the question concisely and directly. Make sure you understand what the question is asking for and provide the most relevant information. Use bullet points or numbered lists if appropriate. Pay attention to the word limit, and avoid including unnecessary information.

4 Matching Questions

- Review all options carefully before matching them to the corresponding items. Start by matching the items you're most confident about. Cross out matched items to avoid confusion. Double-check your matches before moving on to ensure accuracy.

5 Fill in the Blank Questions

- Read the sentence carefully to understand the context. Look for clues within the sentence or surrounding text to help you fill in the blank. Ensure that your answer fits grammatically and makes sense in the context of the sentence. If allowed, use the process of elimination to narrow down choices.

Main Reference

Cottrell, S. (2013). *The study skills handbook* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

